



Family fun on a budget in northern Indiana

By Jen Thomas (Story may be used with or without this byline)

Gas prices may have tried to suck the fun out of summer vacations, but summer fun doesn't have to involve a cross-country road trip. You can take a break from the daily hustle, spend some time with the family, and recharge your batteries, all without breaking the bank. And – don't tell the kids – you just might learn something along the way. The Indiana Office of Tourism Development offers these travel ideas from northern Indiana.

One-stop look at a simpler life: Amish Country

Have the kids put away the iPods and turn off the DVD player so you can introduce them to life the Amish way. Northern Indiana Amish Country features the third-largest old-order Amish community in the United States, so it's a great place to experience the lifestyle of the Amish through guided tours, farm animals, restaurants, musical theatre, craft demonstrations and quaint shops.

New this year is the free Quilt Gardens Tour. Featuring 12 gardens and 11 original murals – all in quilt patterns and each with its own unique design and special story – the 23-stop tour will take visitors along the Heritage Trail to the communities of Elkhart, Bristol, Goshen, Middlebury, Nappanee, Wakarusa and Shipshewana. Enjoy the tour's 60,000 blooms until the first frost.

A free Heritage Trail CD audio tour is available at the Elkhart County Visitors Center. You can drive through the county at your own pace and discover such gems as Amish Acres, an 80-acre historic resort with two inns, a restaurant and the Round Barn Theatre; American Countryside Farmers Market, built by Amish craftsmen and filled with gifts, crafts and fresh foods to eat there or to take home; and the friendly cities of Elkhart, Goshen, Nappanee and small-town main streets of Middlebury and Shipshewana, which are all located along the easy-to-follow guided route.

Fill up for less: Das Dutchman Essenhaus

There's no better place to fill up hungry kids than an all-you-can-eat restaurant. At Das Dutchman Essenhaus, the food is not only filling, it's delicious. Famous for being the largest restaurant in Indiana – with 1,100 seats – the charming Essenhaus features family-style dining with crispy broasted chicken, tender roast beef, mashed potatoes, homemade gravy, made-from-scratch noodles, corn, green beans, and more than 29 varieties of pies. And for kids under 12, you'll pay just \$1.20 per year of their age.

After dinner, Mom might want to check out The Village Shops next to the Essenhaus while Dad treats the kids to a horse-drawn carriage ride, miniature golf or a spin on rental bikes.

‘Udderly’ fascinating: Fair Oaks Farms

One of the largest dairy farms in the country, Fair Oaks Farms in Jasper County, welcomes visitors nearly every day of the year to show just what it takes to produce 4 million glasses of milk a day. For starters, you need about 30,000 cows.

The interactive farm experience takes you on a journey encompassing the circle of life, from watching a live birth of a calf (about 80 are born daily), seeing 72 cows being milked at a time and then learning what happens to all that milk (some of it stays right on-site, where you can taste home-made ice cream and cheese). You’ll see how all those cows get fed and, well, find out what happens to that other stuff they produce ... manure. It’s all recycled, turned in to energy or re-used right on the farm.

Fair Oaks is located off Interstate 65 south of Chicago and north of Lafayette.

Hands-on fun (and learning): Fort Wayne Children’s Zoo and Science Central

It doesn’t matter whether you want to spend your day at the zoo or inside the science center (or maybe both). Either way, the experience will be one that involves more doing than seeing.

For instance, you can help feed the sea lions, chat with a real scuba diver or zoo keeper, and learn more about the animals at the popular Fort Wayne Children’s Zoo. The regular chats and interactive experiences are part of the reason that *Child Magazine* ranks the zoo among the top 10 zoos in the country.

Nearby, at Science Central, visitors are exploring the world and opening their minds. One of the newest attractions at Science Central in Fort Wayne is Launch P.A.D. (Professional Academic Directions). A collection of exhibits explores space, and answers questions such as: How would we get to Mars? What materials would be used to build the moon? Are there really dwarf planets, Eris and Ceres?

The biggest challenge at Science Central is getting the little ones to take a break – or rejoin modern civilization, if they’re hanging out with Fred, the Buesching Mastodon. He’s the star of an exhibit that traces the mastodon after the ice age. Whether it’s focused on prehistoric dinosaurs or futuristic space travel, each exhibit includes interactive stations, where visitors can explore and most kids don’t even realize they’re learning.

Illuminating: Kokomo Opalescent Glass Factory

Little has changed inside the humble Kokomo Opalescent Glass Factory since it opened in 1888. It’s the oldest factory in this Howard County community, and the oldest opalescent glass factory in the world.

Twice a week (10 a.m. Wednesdays and Fridays), Kokomo Opalescent Glass opens its doors for the public to see behind the scenes for a nominal admission fee of \$1.

Glass made here is used to in stained glass windows, vases, decorations and art. Just as in the early years, the sheets of colored glass are made with a machine and artisans, who work quickly to turn raw materials into large sheets of colored – often textured – glass that is then shipped all over the world.

The glass factory continues to produce thousands of sheets of opalescent glass made into more than 22,000 different combinations of colors, sizes and textures.

At the hot glass studio, you can watch as hot glass artists produce a unique range of quality hand-blown and hand-cast glass using the world famous Kokomo Opalescent glass.

Better known is Kokomo's rich history in the automobile industry, which dates back to 1894, when Elwood Haynes invented America's first car. Memorabilia and highlights of the city's tradition in the auto industry are captured inside the Kokomo Automotive Museum on U.S. 31. It includes more than 80 antique and classic cars, historic facades of a 1930's gas station (a gallon was less than 20 cents) and a 1950's diner.

On, in and around the water: Dunes National Lakeshore

Running nearly 25 miles on the southern shore of Lake Michigan from Gary to Michigan City is the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Kids love to climb to the top of Mount Baldy, a sand dune that moves an average of four feet every year making it a "living dune." From the top on a clear day, you can see the Chicago skyline.

Mount Baldy is accessible from US 12 between the town of Pines and the western border of Michigan City. Not far from the access road to Mount Baldy is a Best Value Inn that's currently under renovation and that will reopen in August as a Best Western. It's about 100 yards from Pine Lake.

While you're in the area, be sure not to miss Indiana Dunes State Park with its 15 miles of beaches, as well as sand dunes, bogs, marshes, rivers and more.

Artificial course, real fun: South Bend

You can enjoy a whitewater rafting experience right here in Indiana. South Bend is home to the first artificial white river course in North America. The East Race Waterway cuts through downtown along Niles Avenue. While most prefer to take a raft out with friends, kayaking also is available.

The 1,900-foot waterway was built in 1984, and since has had more than 240,000 rafters and kayakers. The waterway is open through Aug. 10, and is \$4 a ride.

If you're in downtown South Bend, chances are if you don't see it, you'll smell the sweet scents coming from the South Bend Chocolate Factory. It opened in South Bend in 1991, and in addition to a chocolate shop, it also offers the Chocolate Museum - which houses one of

the world's largest collection of chocolate-related memorabilia – as well as the Inside Scoop Tour, where you'll learn all about chocolate making and experience interactive exhibits.

At the College Football Hall of Fame, legends come alive, and you'll be surrounded by the sites and sounds of college football inside the 360-degree Stadium Theater. And, when you're ready, test your own skills inside the Practice Field.

Splish, splash, aaaah: Splash Universe in Shipshewana

With 100,000 gallons of water and a 500-gallon splash bucket, chances are someone is going to get wet, but that's OK – in fact, it's the whole idea. Opened earlier this year, Splash Universe in Shipshewana was created to bring summertime fun to visitors, regardless of what the weather's doing outside. The totally enclosed water park stays a constant 84 degrees. There's a splash pool and a lily pad for the little ones, dual vortex slides and a three-story water jungle gym for older kids, and a floating river that's hard for anyone to resist. When parents want some quiet time, they can retreat to the adults-only hot springs hot tub.

The water park is part of a resort featuring 154-themed guest rooms and suites, an arcade, a country store and a restaurant. Packages start at \$149.99 for four and include passes to the water park for both days of your stay.

The art of village life: Winona Lake

The Village at Winona Lake was once known primarily for popular water activities such as boating, fishing and sun bathing on a sandy beach. In recent years, however, the Village's cultural amenities have attracted equal attention.

In 1994, local entrepreneurs Dane Miller and Brent Wilcoxson formed Winona Restoration Company. Since then, about 30 properties have been transformed, leading to an economic resurgence of the community and helping to make the Village of Winona Lake (now on the National Register of Historic Places) a summer resort destination filled with a variety of shops and boutiques, art galleries, studios and eateries.

The Village partners with Grace College to bring residents and visitors a variety of performances, including philharmonic orchestra concerts the second Friday of the month. Not only do you get great music, but shops stay open and feature special art exhibitions or additional entertainment.

The Lodge is available for weekly rentals, and Chestnut House Bed and Breakfast – a restored 1906 Princess-Anne-style home – is available for overnight guests.

If You Go

For more details, special packages, pricing and promotions, go to www.VisitIndiana.com/SummerToCelebrate/.

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